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SPIRITUAL BEINGS IN WEST AFRICA : THEIR CLASSES
AND FUNCTIONS.*

BY

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Inequalities among the spirits themselves are so great that they indicate simply differentiations of character or work. So radical are these varieties, and so distinct the names applied to them, that I am compelled to recognize a distinction into classes.

1. *Inina*, or *Ilina*. A human embodied soul is spoken of and fully believed in by all the tribes. It is known in the Mpongwe tribes of the Gaboon country as *Inina* (plural, *anina*) ; in the adjacent Benga tribe, *Ilina* (plural, *alina*) ; in the great interior Fang tribes, *Nsisim*.

This animating soul, whether it be only one, or whether it appear as two or three or even four, is practically the same and the only one that talks, hears and feels, that sometimes goes out of the body in a dream, and that exists as a spirit after the death of the body. That it has its own especial materiality seems to be indicated by the fact that, in the Fang, Bakele, and other tribes, the same word, *nsisim*, means not only *soul*, but also *shadow*. The shadow of a tree, or any other inanimate object, and of the human body, as cast by the sun, is *nsisim*.

In my first explorations up the Ogowe River, in 1874, as my village preaching necessarily and constantly spoke of our soul—its sins, its capacity for suffering or happiness, and its relation to its divine Maker—I was often at a loss how to make my thoughtless audience understand or appreciate that the “*nsisim*” of which I was speaking was not the *nsisim* cast by the sun as a darkish line

* See BULLETIN No. 5, 1901.

on the ground near their bodies. Even to those who understood me it was not an impossible thought that that dark narrow belt on the ground was in some way a part of or a mode of manifestation of that other thing, the *nsisim*, which they admitted was the source of the body's animation. So far defined was that thought with some of them that they said it was a possible thing for a human being to have his *nsisim* stolen or otherwise lost and still exist in a diseased and dying state, in which case his body would not cast a shadow. The story of "The man without a shadow" in actuality.

2. *Ibambo* (Mpongwe plural, *abambo*). There are vague beings, "abambo," which may well be described by our word "ghosts." Where they come from is not certainly known, or what locality they inhabit, except that they belong to the world of spirits. Why they become visible is also unknown. They are not called, they are only occasionally worshipped; their epiphany is dreaded, not revered.

The *ibambo* may appear anywhere and at any time and to anybody. But it has no message. It rarely speaks. Its most common effect on human lives is to frighten. It flits; it does not stand or remain in one spot, to speak or to be spoken to. Indistinctly seen, its appearances are reported as occurring mostly in dark places—in shadows, in twilight, and on dark nights. The most common places are lonely paths in the forest by night.

To all intents and purposes these *abambo* are what superstitious fears in our civilization call "ghosts." The timid dweller in civilization can no more tell us what that ghost is than can the ignorant African. It is as difficult in the one case as in the other to argue against the unreal and unknown. What the frightened eye or ear believes it saw or heard it persists in believing against all proof. Nor will ridicule make the belief less strong. However, the intelligent child in civilization, under the hand of a judicious parent or other friend, and relying on love as an expounder, can be led to understand, by daylight, that the white bark of a tree trunk shimmering in uncertain moonlight, or a white garment flapping in the wind, or a white animal grazing in the meadow, was the ghost whose waving form had scared him the night before. His superstition is not so ingrained by daily exercise but that reason and love can divest him of it. But, to the denizen of Fetich-land, superstition is religion; the night terror which he is sure he saw is too real a thing in his life to be identified, by day time, as only a harmless white barked tree or quartz rock.

3. A third class of spirits is represented by the names *Ombwiri*, *Nkinda*, and *Olaga*. The ombwiri (Mpongwe plural, awiri) is certainly somewhat local, and so far forth might be regarded as the ancient fauns and dryads, with a suggestion of Druidic worship of spirits resident in the dense oak groves and the massive stones of the Druid circle. But the *awiri* are more than dryads. They are not confined to their local rock, tree, bold promontory, or point of land, where they resent trespass by human beings. The traveller must go by silently, or with some cabalistic invocation, with bowed or bared head, and with some offering—anything, even a pebble. On the beach, as I bend to pass beneath an enormous tree fallen across the pathway, I observe the upper side of the log covered with votive offerings—pebbles, shells, leaves, etc.—laid there by travellers as they stooped to pass under. Such votive collections may be seen on many spots along the forest paths, deposited there by the natives as an invocation of a blessing on their journey.

While the ombwiri is indeed feared, it is with a respectful reverence, different from the scare of an ibambo. Ombwiri is something fine and admirable in vision (when seen, which is rare); it is white, like a white person. Souls of distinguished chiefs and other great men turn to Awiri. *Nkinda* are spirits of the common dead. The fear with which the native regards massive rocks and large trees—the ombwiri homes—need not be felt by white people; white people being themselves considered awiri, their bodies being inhabited by the departed spirits of the negro dead.

4. *Mondi*. There are beings, Myondi (Benga singular, *mondi*), who are passive agents in causing sickness, or in either aiding or hindering human plans. But they are not always simply passive; they are often active on their own account, or at their own pleasure, generally to injure. They are invoked at the new moons; and at any other times, particularly in sickness. The native *oganga* decides whether or no they be myondi that are afflicting the patient. This diagnosis being made, and myondi being declared as present in the patient's body, the indication is that they are to be exorcised.

A slight doubt must be admitted in regard to these myondi, whether they do constitute a distinct and separate class, or whether any spirit of any class may not become a *mondi*. The name in that case would be given them, not as a class but as producers of certain effects, at certain times and under certain circumstances.

5. *Yaka*. There seems to be another class, somewhat like the

ancient lares and penates, belonging to the household, worshipped by a family, and associated with a certain family-fetich called yaka. This form descends by inheritance with the family. In its honour is sacredly kept a bundle of toes, fingers, or other bones, nail clippings, eyes, brains, etc., etc., accumulated from deceased members of successive generations. This is distinctly an ancestral worship.

The worship of ancestors is a marked and distinguishing characteristic of the religious system of Southern Africa. This is something more definite and intelligible than the religious ceremonies performed in connection with the other classes of spirits.—*Wilson*.

What was described by Dr. Wilson as respect for the aged among the tribes of Southern Guinea, forty years ago, is true still, in a large measure even where foreign customs and examples of foreign traders and the practices of foreign Governments have broken down native etiquette and native patriarchal government. Perhaps there is no part of the world where respect and veneration for age are carried to a greater length than among this people. For those who are in office, and who have been successful in trade, or in war, or in any other way have rendered themselves distinguished among their fellow-men, this respect, in some outward forms at least, amounts almost to adoration ; and proportionately so when the person has attained to advanced age. All the younger members of society are early trained to show the utmost deference to age. They must never come into the presence of aged persons or pass by their dwellings without taking off their hats and assuming a crouching gait. When seated in their presence it must always be at a "respectful distance"—a distance proportioned to the difference in their ages and position in society. If they come near enough to hand an aged man a lighted pipe or a glass of water, the bearer must always fall upon one knee. Aged persons must always be addressed as "father" (*rera*, *lale*, *paia*) or "mother" (*ngwe*, *ina*). Any disrespectful deportment or reproachful language toward such persons is regarded as a misdemeanour of no ordinary aggravation. A youthful person carefully avoids communicating any disagreeable intelligence to such persons, and almost always addresses them in terms of flattery and adulation. And there is nothing which a young person so much deprecates as the curse of an aged person, and especially that of a revered father.

6. Possibly there is a sixth class. There may enter into any animal's body (generally a leopard's) some spirit or, even temporarily, the soul of a living human being. The animal then, guided by

human intelligence and will, exercises its strength for the purposes of the temporary human possessor. Many murders are said to be committed in this way—after the manner of the mythical German *wehr-wolf* or the *loup-garou*.

The powers and functions of the several classes of spirits do not seem to be distinctly defined. Certainly they do not confine themselves either to their recognised locality nor to the usually understood activity pertaining to their class. These powers and functions shade into each other, or may be assumed by members of any class. But (1) it is clearly believed that spirits, even of a given class, differ in power among themselves from the other members of that same class. Some are strong, others are weak. (2) They are limited as to the nature of their powers; not *any* spirit can do *all* things. (3) A spirit's *efficiency* runs only on a certain line or lines. (4) All of them can be influenced and be made subservient to human wishes by a variety of incantations.

1. Functions of the first class, or *Anina*.

While embodied in a human form, they constitute the life-principle that demonstrates itself through the various senses, and that lives after the body is dead, continuing itself in the unseen world, with all the same feelings and actuated by the same passions as when embodied as a human soul.

So few are the special activities by which to distinguish them from other classes of spirits that I might doubt whether they should properly be considered as distinct were it not true that the *Anina* are all of them *disembodied* spirits; none of them are of other possible origin. As disembodied spirits retaining memory of their former human relationships they have an interest in human affairs, and especially in the affairs of the family of which they were lately members.

2. Functions of the second class, or *Abambo*.

They are one of the two classes of spirits the worship of which forms the most prominent feature in the superstitious practices of the country.

The term *abambo* is in the plural form, and may, therefore, be regarded as forming a class of spirits instead of a single individual. They are the spirits of dead men; but whether they are positively good or positively evil, to be loved or to be hated, or to be courted or avoided, are points which no native of the country can answer satisfactorily. *Abambo* are the spirits of the ancestors of the people, as distinguished from the spirits of strangers. These are the spirits with which men are possessed, and there is no end to the ceremonies used to deliver them from their power.

3. The functions of the third class, *Awiri*.

These spirits are sometimes spoken of as *Nkinda*, *Olaga* (Mpongwe plural, *Inaga*). They all come from the spirits of the dead. These several names do not indicate a difference as to kind or class of spirit, but a difference in the work or functions they are called upon to exercise. The *Inaga* are spirits of strangers, and have come from a distance.

The derivation of the word *Ombwiri* is not known. As it is used in the plural as well as in the singular form, it no doubt represents a class or family of spirits. He is regarded as a tutelar or guardian spirit. Almost every man has his own *ombwiri*, for which he provides a small house near his own. All the harm that he has escaped in this world, and all the good secured, are ascribed to the kindly offices of this guardian spirit. *Ombwiri* is also regarded as the author of everything in the world which is marvellous or mysterious. Any remarkable feature in the physical aspect of the country, any notable phenomenon in the heavens, or extraordinary events in the affairs of men are ascribed to *Ombwiri*. His favorite places of abode are the summits of high mountains, deep caverns, large rocks, and the base of very large forest trees. And while the people attach no malignity to his character, they carefully guard against all unnecessary familiarity in their intercourse with him, and never pass a place where he is supposed to dwell except in silence. He is the only one of all the spirits recognized by the people that has no priesthood; his intercourse with men being direct and immediate.

Sick persons, and especially those that are afflicted with nervous disorders, are supposed to be possessed by one or the other of these spirits. If the disease assumes a serious form the patient is taken to a priest or a priestess of one or the other of these spirits. Certain tests are applied, and it is soon ascertained to which class the disease belongs, and the patient is accordingly turned over to the proper priest. The ceremonies in the two cases are not materially different; they are alike, at least, in the employment of an almost endless round of absurd, unmeaning, and disgusting ceremonies which none but a heathenish and ignorant priesthood could invent, and none but a poor, ignorant, and superstitious people could ever tolerate.

In either case a temporary shanty is erected in the middle of the street for the occupancy of the patient, the priest, and such persons as are to take part in the ceremony of exorcism. The time employed in performing the ceremonies is seldom less than ten or fifteen days. During this period dancing, drumming, feasting, and drinking are kept up without intermission day and night, and all at the expense of the nearest relative of the invalid. The patient, if a female, is decked out in the most fantastic costume; her face, bosom, arms, and legs are streaked with red and white chalk, her head adorned with red feathers, and much of the time she prome-

nades the open space in front of the shanty with a sword in her hand, which she brandishes in a very menacing way against the bystanders. At the same time she assumes as much of the maniac in her looks, actions, gestures, and walk as possible. In many cases this is all mere affectation, and no one is deceived by it. But there are other cases where these notions seem involuntary and entirely beyond the control of the person; and when you watch the wild and unnatural stare, the convulsive movements of the limbs and body, the unnatural posture into which the whole frame is occasionally thrown, the gnashing of the teeth, and foaming at the mouth, and supernatural strength that is put forth when any attempt is made at constraint, you are strongly reminded of cases of real possession recorded in the New Testament.

There is no reason to suppose that any real cures are effected by these prolonged ceremonies. In certain nervous affections the excitement is kept up until utter exhaustion takes place; and if the patient is kept quiet afterwards (which is generally the case) she may be restored to better health after a while; and, no matter how long it may be before she recovers from this severe tax upon her nerves, the priest claims the credit of it. In other cases the patient may not have been diseased at all, and, of course, there was nothing to be recovered from.

If it should become a case of undissembled sickness, and the patient become worse by this unnatural treatment, she is removed, and the ceremonies are suspended, and it is concluded that it was not a real possession, but something else. The priests have certain tests by which it is known when the patient is healed, and the whole transaction is wound up when the fees are paid. In all cases of this kind it is impossible to say whether the devil has really been cast out or merely a better understanding arrived at between him and the person he has been tormenting. The individual is required to build a little house or temple for the spirit near his own, to take occasional offerings to him, and pay all due respect to his character, or to be subject to renewed assaults at any time. Certain restrictions are imposed upon the person who has recovered from these satanic influences. He must refrain from certain kinds of food, avoid certain places of common resort, and perform certain duties; and, for the neglect of any of these, is sure to be severely scourged by a return of his malady. Like the Jews, in speaking of the actions of these demoniacs, they are said to be done by the spirit, and not by the person who is possessed. If the person performs any unnatural or revolting act—as the biting off of the head

of a live chicken and sucking its blood—it is said that the spirit, not the man, has done it.

But the views of the great mass of the people on these subjects are exceedingly vague and indefinite. They attend these ceremonies on account of the parade and excitement that usually accompany them, but they have no knowledge of their origin, their true nature, or of their results. Many submit to the ceremonies because they are persuaded to do so by their friends, and, no doubt, in many cases in the hope of being freed from some troublesome malady. But as to the meaning of the ceremonies themselves, or the real influence which they exert upon their bodily diseases, they probably have many doubts, and when called upon to give explanation of the process which they have passed through, they show that they have none but the most confused ideas.

4. The functions of the fourth class, *Myondi*.

These are much the same as those of the third class, except that in power they seem to be more independent than other spirits. They are active, self-willed, and generally malignant causers of disease, and they are worshipped almost always only in a deprecatory way. They often take violent possession of human bodies; and for their expulsion it is that Inaga, Nkinda, and Awiri are invoked.

5. Functions of the spirit of the family-fetish, *Eyaka* (Benga plural, *Byaka*). The respect for parents and other aged persons already referred to in this chapter,

by a very natural operation of the mind, is turned into idolatrous regard for them when dead. It is not supposed that they are divested of their power and influence by death; but, on the contrary, they are raised to a higher and more powerful sphere of influence, and hence the natural disposition of the living, and especially those related to them in any way in this world, to look to them and call upon them for aid in all the emergencies and trials of life. It is no uncommon thing to see large groups of men and women, in times of peril or distress, assembled along the brow of some commanding eminence, or along the skirts of some dense forest, calling in the most piteous and touching tones upon the spirits of their ancestors.

Images are used in the worship of ancestors, but they are seldom exposed to public view. They are kept in some secret corner, and the man who has them in charge especially if they are intended to represent a father or predecessor in office, takes food and drink to them, and a very small portion of almost everything that is gained in trade.

But a yet more prominent feature of this ancestral worship is to be found in the preservation and adoration of the bones of the dead, which may be fairly regarded as a species of relic worship. The skulls of distinguished persons are preserved with the utmost care, but always kept out of sight. I have known the head of a distinguished man to be dissevered from the body when it was but partially decomposed,

and suspended so as to drip upon a mass of chalk, provided for the purpose. The brain is supposed to be the seat of wisdom, and the chalk absorbs this by being placed under the head during the process of decomposition. By applying this to the foreheads of the living, it is supposed they will imbibe the wisdom of the person whose brain has dripped upon the chalk.

In some cases all the bones of a beloved father or mother, having been dried, are kept in a wooden chest, for which a small house is provided, where the son or daughter goes statedly to hold communication with their spirits. They do not pretend to have any audible responses from them, but it is a relief to their minds in their more serious moods to go and pour out all the sorrows of their heart in the ear of a revered parent.

This belief, however much of superstition it involves, exerts a very powerful influence upon the social character of the people. It establishes a bond of affection between the parent and child much stronger than could be expected among a people wholly given up to heathenism. It teaches the child to look up to the parent not only as its earthly protector, but as a friend in the spirit land. It strengthens the bonds of filial affection, and keeps up a lively impression of a future state of being. The living prize the aid of the dead, and it is not uncommon to send messages to them by some one who is on the point of dying; and so greatly is this aid prized by the living, that I have known an aged mother to avoid the presence of her sons, lest she should by some secret means be dispatched prematurely to the spirit world, for the double purpose of easing them of the burden of taking care of her and securing for themselves more effective aid than she could render them in this world.

All their dreams are construed into visits from the spirits of their deceased friends. The cautions, hints and warnings which come to them through this source are received with the most serious and deferential attention, and are always acted upon in their waking hours. The habit of relating their dreams, which is universal, greatly promotes the habit of dreaming itself, and hence their sleeping hours are characterized by almost as much intercourse with the dead as their waking hours are with the living. This is, no doubt, one of the reasons of their excessive superstitiousness. Their imaginations become so lively that they can scarcely distinguish between their dreams and their waking thoughts, between the real and the ideal, and they consequently utter falsehood without intending, and profess to see things which never existed.—See DR. WILSON, *Western Africa*.

All that is quoted above from Dr. Wilson is still true among tribes not touched by civilization. What he relates of the love of children for parents and the desire to communicate with their departed spirits is particularly true of the children of men and women who have held honourable position in the community while they were living. And it is also all consistent with what I have described of the fear with which the dead are regarded and the dread lest they should revenge some injury done them in life. The common people and those who had neglected their friends in any way would be the ones who would dread this. The better classes, especially of the superior tribes, would be the ones to hold their dead in affectionate remembrance.

I have met with instances of the preservation of a parent's

brains for fetich purposes, as mentioned above by Dr. Wilson. As honoured guest I have been given the best room in which to sleep overnight. On a flat stone, in a corner of the room, was a pile of greyish substance; it was chalk mixed with the decomposed brain matter that had dripped on it from the skull that formerly had been suspended above it. I then remembered how, on visiting chiefs in their villages, they frequently were not in the public reception room on my arrival; but I was kept awaiting them. They had been apprized of the white man's approach, had retired to their bedrooms, and when they reappeared it was with their foreheads and sometimes with other parts of their bodies marked with that greyish mixture. The object was that they be given wisdom and success in any question of diplomacy or in a favour they might be asking of the white man.

6. Functions of what is possibly a sixth class.

This belief in demoniacal possession of a lower animal must not be confounded with the equally-believed transmigration of souls. It is widespread over at least a third of the African continent. In Mashonaland

they believe that at times both living and dead persons can change themselves into animals, either to execute some vengeance or to procure something they wish for; thus a man will change himself into a hyena or a lion to steal a sheep and make a good meal off it; into a serpent to avenge himself on some enemy. At other times, if they see a serpent it is one of the Matotela tribe or slave tribe, which has thus transformed himself to take some vengeance on the Barotse (*Dècle*).